

Vedic Religion

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Vedic Dharma contains a treasury of spiritual laws that were discovered and realized by unknown number of sages and saints over many millennia and were compiled into the Vedas and Upanishads and later in many additional books in the form of explanations and stories as the situation and time demanded. So the Vedic Dharma or religion or culture is not started by a person. The thing to understand is that the Vedas were not originated or composed by anyone. They are revelations that were recorded. The spiritual knowledge that became the Vedas and Vedic literature are part of the *Shabda Brahman*, or the spiritual vibration that exists eternally, within and without the material energy and manifestation, and before, during, and after the creation and annihilation of the cosmic manifestation. Sages who were and are capable of entering that spiritual dimension, or have glimpses into that strata, can easily realize and imbibe the knowledge that exists in that realm and then prescribe or compose them for the benefit of all of humanity.

Vedic Religion includes ritualistic, philosophical and cultural views of Vedic seers. It can be studied by understanding the deep meaning of mantras. Here we are trying to give some specific principles of Vedic religion so that it can be identified in its general nature.

1. Aims of a Human Life

According to the doctrines of the Vedas, life of a human being should be happy and satisfied physically, mentally and spiritually. In Vedic Mantras

we find many prayers for prosperity, long life, wealth, intelligence, family, children and food. All this is desirable for a good and high- quality life and Vedic Seers have underlined this fact.

Moksha or liberation is recommended as the highest goal of human life by Upanishads. According to Upanishads for a human being, the highest aim to be expected is union with the Brahman. This union or ultimate liberation can be attained only by giving up non-knowledge (*Ajnana*) and by achieving knowledge (*Jnana*). Only he who has recognized the oneness of the Atman with the Brahman will obtain complete union with the Brahman. '*Brahmavid Brahmaiva bhavati*' is the famous sentence from Mundaka Upanishad which means 'he, who knows Brahman, becomes Brahman'. According to Upanishads, in order to attain this highest aim it is necessary to give up all works, good as well as bad. For sacrifices and pious works only lead to *Svarga*, this is not the highest goal, because after enjoying *Svarga* the soul comes back for rebirth. Knowledge alone, knowledge of Self or Brahman, knowledge of oneness, leads to the One and Eternally True Brahman. In the Katha Upanishad, Naciketa through his third boon wants to know Brahman alone for obtaining the highest goal of Absolute Immortality. So according to the Upanishads knowledge of Reality leads to salvation.

2. Belief in One Supreme Entity

The two conceptions, Atman and Brahman are commonly treated as synonymous in the Upanishads. Often they are interchanged with one another. But, strictly speaking, Brahman represents the supreme power or principle which pervades the universe and Atman, and its part is manifested in a being. The great fundamental doctrine of the Upanishads is identity of

the individual Atman with the world-Atman (Brahman). It is most forcibly expressed in a frequently repeated sentence of the Chandogya Upanishad (6.8-16)-

"This whole world consists of it: that is the Real, which is the Soul, that art thou, O Shvetaketu."

In that famous formula "That are you" (*tat tvam asi*), all the teachings of the Upanishads are summed up. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1.4.6) expresses the same doctrine-

"Whoever knows this 'I am Brahma' (*aham Brahma asmi*), becomes the All. Even the gods are not able to prevent him from becoming it because he becomes their Self (Atman)."

First mantra of Ishavasyopanishad says that the Supreme Brahman is pervaded every where-

Isha vasyamidam sarvam yat kinca jadyam jagat /

Tena tyaktena bhunjitha ma gridhah kasya sviddhanam ||

Translation - All this whatever there is changeful in this changing universe should be enveloped by the Lord. Protect the Self by this renunciation. Do not covet the wealth of anyone. (Do not covet, for whose is this wealth?)

Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda (10. 90) describes Supreme Brahman or Purusha as Universal soul. The first Mantra of the Purusha- Sukta establishes the same fact saying-

Sahasrashirshah purushah sahasraksha sahasrapat /

Sah bhumim vishvato vrittva atyatishtat dashangulam ||

Translation: The Perfect Being has thousands of heads, thousands of eyes and thousands of feet. Having pervaded the whole earth on all sides, He remains ten fingers in surplus (as He is endless).

The Hiranya-garbha Sukta is regarded important for the description of creation in the Rigveda. According to traditional view Hiranya-garbha is the first aspect created from Brahman and later it causes the creation and all beings. One Mantra says-

*Hiranyagarbha samavartatagre bhutasya jatah patireka asita /
Sa dadhara prithivim dyamutemam kasmai devaya havisha vidhema ||*

Translation: Hiranya-garbha was produced in the beginning of creation. He was the born sole Lord of all beings. He upheld the earth, the sky and all these. What god (except Him) should we worship with oblation?

3. Importance of Action and Knowledge

According to the Vedic Religion actions are important in life. If a man wants to lead a peaceful and long life he should perform actions most of the time. In this reference second mantra of Ishavashvopanishad is noteworthy-

*Kurvanneveha karmani jijivishetacchatam samah /
Evam tvayi nanyatheto' sti na karma lipyate nare ||*

Translation: Only by performing actions, one should desire to live a hundred years in this earth. For such a man like you there is no way other than this (by which) actions do not cling to.

In Later Vedic Literature, specially in the Brahmanas and Aranyakas texts, various rituals are prescribed which are indeed different forms of actions to get definite fruits related to worldly or divine pleasures. When we study Upanishads, we find that the importance of knowledge of Atman (*Atma-jnana*) is described everywhere. In this regard, a simple story of Katha Upanishad is to be mentioned.

A poor and pious Rishi Vajashrava performed an elaborate sacrifice that required, among other things, the giving away of all his wealth and possessions. He had a son named Naciketa who though young had a higher spiritual consciousness. He watched the proceedings and saw the gifts being given. After performance, Rishi gave away a few old and feeble cows to the priests as *Dakshina*. Naciketa found them absolutely useless for any purpose. Such an unworthy gift would only bring misery to his father after death, the boy realized. He thought that instead of getting the fruit of the great sacrifice, his father would go to the regions of misery and therefore, it was the duty of the son to save his father even at the cost of his own life. He asked to his father that a son was also property and should be included among the things for distribution. He wished to know, therefore, to whom he was going to be given. He asked the question, “Father! To whom are you going to give me?” His father did not pay any attention to the question, but went on with the routine of the great sacrifice. Naciketa repeated the question three times till Vajashrava losing patience exclaimed without meaning anything like what he said, “I shall give you to Death, to Yama”. Father was only annoyed and so answered angrily that he would give him to Yama, the King of Death. Later he was shocked at his own exclamation. Naciketa asked his father to follow the path of truth and send him to the Abode of Death. The father did accordingly. Naciketa then went to the abode of Yama. The latter held a high position among the gods. He was reputed to be a teacher of the Knowledge of Brahman. As Yama had gone out, Naciketa stayed at his doors for three days and nights without food and water. On returning home, Yama felt sorry for what had happened in his absence, but then apologizing worshipped him as his guest. Yama then gave him three boons, one for each night. Naciketa used his first boon in

obtaining the pleasure and peace of mind for his father. By the second boon he got the knowledge of the Divine Fire for sacrificial rituals which could be used for obtaining a place in the heaven. This boon shows the importance of actions and rituals for heavenly pleasure. Then in exchange of the third boon, he requested Yama to instruct him with the knowledge of Atman. Upon this, Yama insisted upon him in several ways not to be adamant upon having the *Atma-jnana* in as much as even gods were unable to understand the nature of it. But Naciketa said, “If even the gods had doubts in this matter and you say that it is not easily to be comprehended, who then could expound it to me as you can, O Death and what other boon can be equal to this?” At last Yama granted him his desired boon through the teaching of the Katha Upanishad, which includes various aspects of complete spiritual knowledge.

Thus the story states that actions are essential for worldly and heavenly pleasures, but for obtaining final aim of life i.e. liberation or Moksha, attainment of real knowledge is necessary.

4. Purification of the Mind

Vedic Religion emphasizes on the purity of mind. Shivasankalpa-Sukta of Yajurveda indicates significance of good will and purification of mind for human beings. The mantra points out that everything in the world is the outcome of the mind. The mind has tremendous power. It is the actual illuminator of all the perceptive senses of men. If human mind has good thoughts all will be good. Our senses are instruments of knowledge so they are just like lights (*Jyoti*). But mind is even their light because they can work when mind activates them. Therefore good motivation of mind is most

important. When the mind is evil it can bring destruction, when it is noble and pure it can bring peace. In the end of all the mantras of this sukta a common phrase is given that 'may that mind of mine be of auspicious (*Shiva*) resolution (*sankalpa*).'

- *Tanme manah shivasankalpamastu .*

5. Nature Worship, Vedic Deities and Vedic Symbolism

The Vedic Aryans were children of nature. They studied nature's drama very minutely. Sand-storm and cyclone, intense lightening, terrific thunder-claps, the heavy rush of rain in monsoon, the swift flood in the stream that comes down from the hills, the scorching heat of the sun, the cracking red flames of the fire, all witness to power beyond man's power. The Vedic sages felt the greatness of these forces. They adored these activities. They appreciated these forces. They worshiped and prayed them due to regard, surprise and fear. They realized instinctively that action, movement, creation, change and destruction in nature are the results of forces beyond men's control. And thus they attributed divinity to nature.

The main part of Rigveda belongs to Natural hymns, the hymns related with natural forces. Yet Vedic gods are explained in different ways by the scholars of India and West, but speaking generally, the hymns addressed to deities (*Devata*) are under the influence of the most impressive phenomenon of nature and its aspects. The word *Devata* means divine, divinity which is bright, strong, donor, and powerful. In these hymns we find prayers for certain natural elements such as air, water, earth, sun, rain, dawn etc. The glorious brightness of the sun, the blaze of the sacrificial fire, the sweep of the rain-storm across the skies, the recurrence of the dawn, the

steady currents of the winds, the violence of the tropical storm and other such natural energies, fundamental activities or aspects are glorified and personified as divinities (*Devata*). The interaction with nature resulted in appreciation and prayer but, indeed, after a good deal of observation. Attributes assigned to deities fit in their natural forms and activities, as Soma is green, fire is bright, air is fast moving and sun is dispenser of darkness. The characteristics of these forces described in the verses prove that Vedic seers were masters of natural science. All powers, aspects or activities of nature are generally regarded as deities because they are helpful, beneficial and essential for our life. Rivers, mountains, earth, air, water, plants, trees, forest, fire, rain, cloud, Sun, Moon etc, all are deities in Vedic mythology. In Rigveda the names of major deities are, such as Agni, Indra, Vayu, Earth, Soma, Varuna, Vishnu, Aditya, Usha, Aditi, Parjanya, etc.

Through Vedic symbolism we can understand the formation of Vedic deities.

1. They are helpful and essential in our life so they should to worshiped or respected.
2. Worshiping gives the sense of their importance in environment and life. This also develops the ecological consciousness of the worshiper.
3. The attributes assigned to deities are their characteristics in general and according to that generally prayers are performed and objects are desired. It means that to get that thing from a particular deity, in fact we should develop those divine qualities in ourselves.

For example *Gayatri Mantra* is taken here:

Tatsaviturvarenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi /

dhiyo yo nah prachdayat//

This mantra is of Deva Savita. Here worship is saying that he is concentrating on the *Varenya Bharga* (Brilliance) of Savita and he is desirous to get Intelligence. By chanting this Mantra worshiper requests Savita, the Sun to give him intelligence because he is meditating on its luminous and glowing form. Sun's brilliance symbolizes knowledge and wisdom. If we will be away from the darkness of ignorance, light of knowledge will come to us automatically. This is the hidden meaning of this Vedic prayer.

6. Purpose and Scientific Basis of Vedic Rituals

According to Vedic views traditional rites and rituals have a definite influence upon individuals. The activities involved while performing rites and rituals may include a *yajna*, chanting mantras, and special offerings, which are based upon scientific principles. Scientists acknowledge the influence of sound and music, color, magnetic vibrations, and knowledge on which we concentrate. There is no doubt about the uplifting effect of rites and rituals. Good actions promote good habits and positive impressions that are absorbed by the mind and consciousness. Even psychologists admit that a person picks up good habits quickly when directed by good people in the correct environment. The conscious mind controls the bulk of everyday activities. The unconscious mind looks after the more subtle and finer activities. The conscious mind collects impressions and influences from the outside world. The Vedic rituals provide a means for this to happen. However, the unconscious mind sorts the information and builds memories. Depending upon the kind of impressions and influences one gathers from the

environment, the subconscious mind gradually transforms itself accordingly. A skillful and efficient mind renders the best support and service to the soul. It is not possible to awaken the perception of one's soul without a controlled and pure mind.

During rites and rituals a priest invokes the blessings of the deities. When individuals experience the kindness of gods and are emotionally touched during the *yajna* and other activities, the mind gets charged with religious feelings. The importance of the occasion, the enthusiasm, the purity of the place, an emotional oath by the individual, the presence of the family, relatives and friends together add up to create a special kind of mental state. Activities during rituals leave an indelible impression upon the individual. This impression specially influences and educates the mind. The effect of the ceremonies depends upon the atmosphere on the occasion and the way it is conducted.

Hindus observe a variety of rites and rituals. The *Gautam Smriti* mentions that there are 40 basic rituals. Some religious texts place this figure at 48. According to Maharishi Angira, there are 25 basic forms of rituals. *Agnihotra* is a simple rite. It also means a sacrificial fire. This is the ritual in which *ghee* and sesame seeds, and on some occasions other items, are offered into a small fire, usually in a pot or special container, while the priest chants various mantras for petitioning the presence and mercy of God. The fire, Agni Devata, the fire god, becomes the mouth of God, through which He accepts our offerings. These are also distributed to the other gods. Thus, prayers for many divinities are chanted during the ceremony. The ritual invokes auspiciousness, peace, goodwill, and changes the vibrations and atmosphere wherever it is held. Sometimes people who are confused or misinformed think that Hindus or followers of Vedic culture practice the

sacrifice of animals to the deities or in rituals. However, this is completely wrong.

7. Chanting of Vedic Mantra and Om

According to Vedic views Mantras are powerful and effective if chanted with full consciousness and attention, and with an understanding of their meanings. A mantra is a sacred verbal formula repeated in prayer or meditation. The chanting of mantras helps to open the heart and mind to clear consciousness, which is the reality of our true identity as a spiritual being. Mantras also create an uplifting and meditative atmosphere for inner communion and one-pointedness of our concentration.

The *Pranava* or Om is the universally accepted symbol of Hinduism, and Vedic culture. Literally the word *Pranava* means "That by which God is effectively praised." It also means, "That which is ever new. Om is the sacred sound of Brahman. Of all the Vedic verses, the most powerful and significant word is the single-syllable incantation called *Pranava* or OM. Om has been extolled highly in the *Vedas*, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-gita as also in other scriptures. It is believed one's own beastly nature may be conquered by repeatedly chanting OM. Generally before chanting a mantra Om should be pronounced. Om is the *Akshara*, or imperishable syllable. Om is the Universe. It is the best name of God. The past, the present and the future, all that was, all that is, all that will be, is Om. Likewise, all else that may exist beyond the bounds of time, that too is Om. This all is said in Mundaka Upanishad.

The Yajurveda exhorts us to try to realize Brahman through, chanting, repeating or remembering OM. The Kathopanishad declares that Om is Parabrahma (the Absolute Self) Itself. The Mandukyopanishad advises the

spiritual aspirants to meditate on the unity of the Atman (Self) with Brahman (God) using OM for *Japa* (repeated chanting). Shri Krishna states in the Gita that He himself is OM among all words. All religious rites are started with the chanting of OM. Not only that, if anyone succeeds in chanting OM at the time of his death, simultaneously thinking of God, he attains the highest Truth according to ancient belief. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali declare that *Pranava* is the symbol of God and that one can attain *Samadhi* by its repetition, and meditation on Him.

The symbol Om is used for invocation, benediction, ritual worship, festivals, and religious ceremonies. It represents three separate sounds: 'A' 'U' 'M' plus the nasalization and resonance of the sound. It is said that within the 'AUM', Vishnu is 'A', Brahma is 'U' and Shiva is 'M'; *bindu* (dot) is the trinity in unity while the *nada* (crescent) symbolizes transcendence. In the Upanishads, however, AUM is the symbol of the *nirguna* (formless) Brahman, without attributes, beyond human consciousness and duality.

8. Concept of Social Unity and Welfare of All

In the Rigveda-Samhita we find a unique prayer for social unity. It is called Samjnana sukta. The term '*Samjnana*' gives the sense of unity in thoughts. The unanimity and harmony on mental and intellectual level among the people gathered is its purpose. The devotee invokes the Lord of creation to inspire mankind with the feeling of love, and the Lord commands that all should be bound together with a common aim, common thought and common will. The verse says-

*Sam gacchadhvam sam vadadhvam sam vo manamsi janatam /
Deva bhagam yatha purve samjanana upasate //*

Translation: You should move together, speak together and think together. As the ancient gods with one accord accept their sacrificial share, so your minds should be of one accord.

Here '*Deva*' may also mean elders of divine qualities. Just as they with full consciousness, played their part in life, so you should follow them. Another prayer from Yajurveda is worth mentioning here. It is for the feeling of Goodness among all beings. Here the term '*Bhadra*' is used which means "goodness" -

Bhadram karnebhih s'unuyama devah
Bhadram pas'yemakshabhir yajatrah |
Sthirairangaistustuvansas tanubhir
Vyas'emahi devahitam yad ayuh ||

-VA.S. 25.21

Translation: O Gods ! may we listen with our ears to what is good (*Bhadram*), may we see with our eyes what is good, O Gods ! Worthy of worship! may we, with firm limbs and bodies, offering praise-songs to you, enjoy the divinely ordained term of life (*Ayu*).

The full span of life is important but more important is that it should be good and auspicious. Our life should be devoted to welfare and noble qualities. Thus Vedic religion believes in the welfare of all beings for global harmony and peace.

9. Wish for *Swasti* and *Swastika*

In Vedic religion importance is given to the desire of *Swasti* , to be auspicious and favorable. The term *swasti* emanates from the Sanskrit word *swasti* = *su* (good) + *asti* (being).

*Om Swasti na indro vradhashravaha,
Swasti nah pusha vishvavedaha /
Swasti nastarkshyo~aristanemih
Swasti no brihaspatirdadhatu //*

This sacred mantra of the Yajurveda is a *swastivachana* - a prayer, an ardent aspiration, for the highest good and well-being of all beings, of everything, of the whole universe. Heart-felt chanting of this hymn is an integral part of initiating every religious sacrament or important family ceremony in the Vedic cultural rituals. It conveys the core and central meaning hidden in the symbol of swastika, used later in Hindu religion.

10. Vedic morals

Vedic religion is based on ethics and morality. What should be done and what should not be done – is the foundation of moral instruction. Here cosmic order is called *Ritam* which is controlled by Varuna Deva. Even gods follow it. All universal activities follow certain discipline, so why not men? *Satyam* is another moral value for deities and for men. Earth is sustained by *Ritam* and *Satyam*.- ‘*Satyen Adhrita Prithivi.*’

Diksha (action), and *Tapas* (austerity) are other values. Always untruth is condemned-

‘*Satyam eva jayate nanritam*’

-Always truth is victorious, not untruth.

Another famous saying from Upanishad points out to ‘study’ as a virtue-

‘*Satyam vada dharmam cara swadhyayat ma pramada.*’

- Always speak truth, do right deeds and don’t leave study.

Indian moral values have their root in Vedas. They are in deed the source of Dharmashastras and epics.

Finally, we can say that Vedic religion is an eternal and universal religion. It talks about welfare of all beings. It recommends rituals for worldly pleasures and achievements. It aims for the purity of mind. It shows the path of knowledge and salvation. The views of Vedic seers on philosophy, ritual, society and culture constitute an idea about ‘Vedic Religion.’ Here an attempt has been made to discuss in brief some of the major aspects of Vedic religion .

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